

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN TODAY'S FIRST NATIONS

Jessica Gigot, Harmony Fields, Bow

Food sovereignty has been defined as, “The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”¹ More specifically the principles of food sovereignty 1) focus on food for people, 2) value food providers, 3) localize food systems, 4) make decision locally, 5) build knowledge and skills and 6) work with nature.¹ While the concept of food sovereignty has international applications and many common threads with organic agriculture philosophies, it has become a unique and relevant movement within Native American communities in the United States. Current food sovereignty efforts are helping to reinforce indigenous self-determination, wellness, culture and values while also rebuilding relationships with land, water, plants and animals.

As the food sovereignty movement grows nationally, there continue to be more stories and examples of how tribal communities have reconnected to food traditions and developed creative solutions for making healthy and fresh food more readily available. Many tribes who have an agrarian past, like the Mvskoke (mvskokefood.org), are returning to traditional farming practices, while traditionally non-farming tribes have integrated gathering and hunting practices with novel garden projects to offer an array of nutritious food.

The First Nations Development Institute (FNDI) is a Colorado-based non-profit with the mission to invest in and create innovative institutions, and to provide models that strengthen asset control and support economic development for American Indian people and their communities. FNDI has been involved with Native American food sovereignty efforts for the past 15 years. FNDI Vice President of Grantmaking, Development and Communications Raymond Foxworth explains, “Fundamentally there is a groundswell of attention being focused on community solutions to combat negative health issues correlated with food. Moreover, there is an active movement of people looking at how food can fuel economic development. Finally, I think there has been a real push to reclaim aspects of traditional foods and traditional diets. This is not only defiance to colonization in the sense it’s taking active control of traditional knowledge, but people are also looking at returning to traditional diets for to return to positive health.”

FNDI has developed a Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool and given over a million dollars in grants to support local food system control. Most recently, FNDI helped create a national Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance that works to put the farmers, wildcrafters, fishers, hunters, ranchers and eaters at the center of decision-making on policies, strategies and natural resource management.

As I completed graduate school in horticulture at Washington State University, what I thought was our state’s only land grant university, I launched my own farm in the Skagit Valley and was looking for meaningful off-farm work related to agricultural research and education. Coincidentally, I learned about the

Northwest Indian College (NWIC), a 1994 land-grant institution based on the Lummi Reservation. With several campuses around the state including Swinomish, Tulalip, Port Gamble, Nisqually, Muckleshoot and Nez Perce, NWIC is one of our country’s 37 tribal colleges and universities.

The college had received a grant to support a new science faculty member at their Swinomish site in La Conner, WA. The college’s cooperative extension program had already established a network of gardens within tribal communities and was actively working on food sovereignty issues. Within the Native Environmental Science department, I was asked to teach science courses as well as work with a community-led garden group to develop local food resources at the Swinomish site. This garden group made up of NWIC faculty, staff and students, tribal employees, and Swinomish community members was motivated to create a space to grow traditional plants and nutritious produce.

As the garden and science program developed, NWIC was awarded external funding from FNDI’s Native American Food Systems Initiative program in 2012. This helped to expand the garden beds and perennial native plantings, and to offer education program in nutrition, traditional foods and gardening. Additionally, I was asked to teach workshops on soil health at the National Food Sovereignty Summit in Green Bay, WI (www.firstnations.org/summit).

Already in its third year, the National Food Sovereignty Summit showcases native food systems projects happening around the country, like the creative culinary efforts of the Sioux Chef (sioux-chef.com) to Winona La Duke’s White Earth Land Recovery project (welrp.org). The Oneida Nation—who host the event in collaboration with FNDI, the Intertribal Agriculture Council, and Northeast Wisconsin Technical College—are leaders in food systems and economic development and as part of the summit I had the honor of touring the Oneida Nation’s agricultural lands. They operate their own buffalo ranch and apple orchard as well as an organic farm that produces mixed vegetables along with their traditional variety of white corn (oneidanation.org/ocifs).

According to Foxworth, “Nationally, many tribes have made substantial reform changes to their food policy. The Muckleshoot have passed a policy banning GM salmon in their waters and the Navajo have passed legislation to tax junk food and reinvest those dollars into community health and wellness. These two policies are leading innovation nationally and



Spring planting in the 13 Moons garden, NWIC La Conner.

Photo credit: Jessica Gigot

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have passed policy that other bodies of government cannot pass.” In addition to policy reform, there are many other examples of creative, community-based programs taking place on tribal lands that include food donation programs, youth and elder gardens, educational farmer’s markets with cooking demonstrations, and the revitalization of traditional food knowledge as well as gathering and production practices.

Within Coast Salish communities in Northwest Washington the garden network, mentioned previously, continues to support and promote regional food sovereignty. Caitlin Krenn, the Nisqually Tribal Community Garden program supervisor, has been involved in this work for the past six years. The Nisqually garden includes an acre of vegetables, another half acre of berries and traditional plants, and a three acre 100-year-old orchard apple and pear orchard; they are planning to expand into several more acres for vegetable production.

According to Krenn, “The garden creates value for the Nisqually Tribe by producing nutritious foods and plant medicines, and encouraging the active practice of traditional ways of healthy living and eating. The garden contributes to real improvements in physical, mental, and emotional healthy for tribal members. All produce is distributed to tribal members and the community through produce stands and direct deliveries to the Elder, Daycare, Head Start, and Youth programs. We also host classes, youth field trips, provide job training opportunities for tribal members, preserve food and medicines, put on annual events, and partner with many tribal departments and outside organizations.” She says, “It has been incredibly inspiring to witness so many food sovereignty efforts within Coast Salish communities. In addition

to the garden, the tribal government has started a commercial shellfish farm, as well as seafood business that buys directly from tribal fisherman and sells to local and regional businesses.”

There are many other participants in this garden network, including the Muckleshoot, Puyallup, and Tulalip Tribes, who each have their own unique gardens and food production approaches. The NWIC Swinomish site group has gained a lot of knowledge and support from the garden network. Now called “13 Moons Garden,” the name reconnects with the traditional Coast Salish idea of living by what nature has to offer in the 13 lunar phases of the year. Recently, the project has received another grant from FNDI to support the development of youth and elder garden curriculum at our site and to facilitate more food-based, intergenerational learning.

Overall, the food sovereignty movement is reestablishing a cultural connection with food and an opportunity for holistic land management strategies that support both ecosystem health as well as personal well-being. Both regionally and nationally, there is a continued interest in food sovereignty opportunities that address the current and pressing need for a revitalization of food traditions and increased access to fresh, healthy food.

Note: The Nisqually Community Garden Project will host a Tilth Producers / WSU Small Farm Program Farm Walk on August 25.

Jessica Gigot, Ph.D., Tilth Producers board member, is owner/operator of Harmony Fields and science faculty within the Northwest Indian College’s Native Environmental Science undergraduate degree program. She is based at the NWIC Swinomish site in La Conner, WA. jjigot@nwic.edu

¹ Source: Nyéléni 2007 - Forum for Food Sovereignty, February 23rd – 27th, 2007, Sélingué, Mali, Synthesis Report www.nyeleni2007.org/spip.php?article334

EDUCATIONAL FARM WALKS SCHEDULE

2015 FARM WALKS

Date	Farm	Location	Region (County)	Topic
July 13	Sleeping Lady Mtn Resort	Leavenworth	North Central (Chelan)	Agritourism, farm-to-table, organic fruit/vegetable
July 27	Perrault Farms	Toppenish	South Central (Yakima)	Organic hops production
August 4 (Tue)	Leach Orchards	Zillah	South Central (Yakima)	Organic orchard management
August 10	Starvation Alley Farms	Long Beach	South West (Pacific)	Organic cranberry
Aug. 25 (Tue)	Nisqually Tribal Community Garden Program	Olympia	West (Thurston)	Community farm, traditional plants
September 14	Quackenbush Farm	Ridgefield	South West (Clark)	Accessing land, vegetables
September 28	Sinclair Orchards & Ciderhouse	Carlton	North Central (Okanogan)	Organic apples, cider production

REGISTRATION AND LOGISTICS

- Cost is \$15 per Farm Walk for Tilth Producers members/agricultural students/farm interns, \$25 for non-members.
- Paid, pre-registration recommended; \$5 late fee for day-of registration.
- Farm Walks are on Mondays or Tuesdays, 12:30 pm – 4:00 pm.
- Sign-in and informal networking bag lunch at 12:00 noon.

Register online at tilthproducers.org or call the office at 206-632-7506 to register over the phone.

The Farm Walk series is supported in part by the National Organic Program Sound and Sensible Outreach, the WSDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, and by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, USDA, Grant # 2012-49400-19575. For more resources and programs for beginning farmers and ranchers please visit www.Start2Farm.gov.